

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR"

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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THE QUESTION OF CAIN.

BY MRS. CASHEL HOEY.

CHAPTER V. AT THE HILL HOUSE.

IF the June days of that year were bright, beautiful, and balmy at South Kensington, how much more bright, beautiful, and balmy were they away at the highest point of breezy Highgate? where the sky was incalculably higher than in the towny regions, and there were real forest trees for the wind to kiss. Not that "they did make no noise," for they made a most delightful rustling, so that the whole soul of summer seemed to be loosed in the old-fashioned garden and grounds, of small extent indeed, but with wonderful resources in the way of clusters of shrubs, winding walks, and rustic seats under the shade of the weeping ash-trees which constituted the chief glory of the Hill House. The grounds were enclosed on three sides by a high wall, with broken glass embedded in its coping of mortar, but the upward slope from the garden proper that lay beneath the wide-spreading back of the house, took off what might otherwise have been a shut-up effect. From the topmost part, where the wall was, with close behind it a noble line of great oaks, clad just now in their richest green garb of midsummer, an extended view of fields and trees, of old red brick houses, of church spires and distant hamlets was to be had. The landscape was a fair one, even in winter; in such weather as that of this particular June, and bathed in such sunshine, it was full of rich and placid beauty which brought quiet content to unambitious minds. A grassy bank lay between the

wall and a trimly kept gravel walk, with flower-beds and clumps of evergreens on the other side of it; down in the distance, on the least elevated spot, stood the Hill House.

It was a large comfortable two-storeyed house, of irregular construction, with a bell-turret in the roof, and a wide passage through the middle of the under-storey, with a ponderous hall-door, and a ponderous garden-door, facing each other, at either end of it. It was pleasant and homely looking, and neither inside nor out had it the cold primness that generally characterises a Ladies' Boarding School. It stood well back from the road, sheltered by a high thick laurel hedge, and shaded by some fine fir-trees.

The windows on the ground floor, at the back of the house, were all open, and in the clear summer air the sound of voices occasionally came faintly to two girls who were seated on the grass, under the boundary wall at the top of the slope, in a spot from whence the view was most comprehensive. They sat in the shade formed by a protecting bough of one of the noble oaks, of which Miss Jerdane used to say, that they belonged much less to their owner, than to her.

"It was kind of Miss Jerdane to give you to me for this afternoon," said the younger of the two girls, as she nestled close to her companion, and shutting her eyes wearily, rested her head upon the other's arm.

"She is very kind," was the reply, "not a bit like the terrible school-mistress in the good books. I wish for your sake, Helen, she wasn't going to be married."

"For my sake, why?"

"Because—well," the speaker found

what she wanted to say not quite easy—"because you might have stayed here, perhaps. She has been a good friend to you, and to me too."

"And my only one. I wonder whether there ever was in the world anyone lonelier than I. I have been thinking a great deal about that since I heard of papa's death; thinking of it more than of him, it seems to me; and it feels so dreadful to have to ask myself what is to become of me? Is it wicked, Jane? Am I a bad, hard-hearted, unnatural girl, to be taken up so much with that thought, when it is only a month since the day when Mr. Simpson's clerk came, and—"

Her sweet lips quivered, and tears rose in her innocent grey eyes.

"Indeed you are not," said her companion soothingly. "Do not torment yourself with fancying that, Nelly dear. You have to think of yourself, you know."

"Yes," assented the younger girl with a sob; "I have, and do it morning, noon, and night; you cannot imagine how I dread the world outside this place, now that I have no right to anybody in it—and what strange thoughts I have! I'll try to tell you some of them, Jane, for you are going away too, and then there will be no one, no one at all."

She changed her position, turning her face towards her companion, and clasping her hands upon her knees.

"When I expected to go out to India, I was not a bit afraid; it seemed to me that papa would be everything, and the place would not matter, so long as he was there. I used to think about what I should do for him, and what our life together would be; I felt as if I knew him quite well, and just what the house was. I called it home in my mind. I had not really seen him since I was quite a little child, but I could see him plainly. Jane, why is it that I cannot see him now? Why is it that ever since he died I have the dreadful feeling that he was only a fancy in my own mind, and though I read his letters over and over again, it never comes back, he is never real to me, and I seem to be striving to grieve more than actually grieving. And all I had thought of, and pictured, and counted on, isn't so much a dreadful disappointment as the vanishing of a phantom. It is just like waking up from a long distinct dream, to—nothing!"

"You see, dear, it was never much more than a dream to you, was it?"

"No, I suppose not. That's the worst

of it. I seem to be so unreal to myself; I am nobody's business and nobody's pleasure."

A rueful little smile gleamed over the lovely face on which the leaves threw flickering shadows—the face that might have been heaven here below to the father and mother who had never seen it, as it was now.

"I wonder what I am for, what is the good of me? Why I did not die when mamma died, years ago; why I am left now that papa is gone, to ask myself that horrid dreary old question: What is to become of me? For nobody can answer it, Jane." She shook her head in a childish, pathetic way, and the light glinted on her chestnut hair. "Not you, though you are so good to me, and we have been such friends; not Miss Jerdane, though she has been good to me too, but she can't be troubled about me just as she is going to be married to Mr. Stephens, after such an awfully long engagement, and giving up the school, and going to New South Wales."

"Does she suggest anything for you to do; any home for you?"

"She has talked to me about it, but—again I wonder if it is horrid of me to have such thoughts—I think she is a little afraid, or that she feels Mr. Stephens would be afraid that I should fancy I have any claim upon them. Of course I have not; I have no claim on anyone in the world. Perhaps," she added wistfully, wandering from the point, "if I had gone out to India, and been there before papa died, some of his friends might have cared for me for his sake."

"If the house were even going to be kept on as a school, it would be something. Miss Jerdane could have recommended you."

"Yes, so she said; but it isn't, and so there's no chance there. And I am too young to be a governess, except to very little children, and that means being a servant. I wish I were more clever, and hadn't been so idle; I might have played well enough if I had worked hard. But I know I don't play well enough to teach, or to play at concerts; my music is no good to me. And it all comes back to the weary old questions: What is the use of me in the world, and what is to become of me? And think, Jane, think how soon I must find some sort of answer to them! Breaking-up time is only a month from now, and by then I must have somewhere to go to and something to do."

She suddenly hid her face in her hands, and though the sun was hot, she shivered.

The elder girl looked at her with grave concern. The contrast between the two friends was striking, and in nothing more remarkable than in the capacity and self-sufficiency to be read in the face of Jane Merrick, and the trustful simplicity and dependence expressed by that of Helen Rhodes. There was no beauty in the one face; the other was full of beauty not yet in its complete expansion. Helen Rhodes's figure was tall, slight, and elegant, her movements were soft and graceful, and though now her girlish gaiety had suffered eclipse, there was about her the lovely bloom and brilliance proper to her seventeen years. Jane Merrick had neither bloom nor brilliance at nineteen; she was short, thin, and dark-complexioned; her face had nothing remarkable about it, except its expression, and her one personal charm was her magnificent black hair. The friends were as different in mind as in person, and in their ways as in either. Jane Merrick was only a "pupil-teacher" at Miss Jerdane's school; Helen Rhodes was a favourite pupil, and justly regarded by Miss Jerdane as a credit to the establishment. Nobody knew exactly who Jane Merrick's people were, there was a general belief that there had been some condescension on Miss Jerdane's part in receiving her (for the Hill House was eminently genteel, not to say exclusive), and that it had been conditioned that Jane was to have no visitors. The pupil-teacher had proved extremely studious as a pupil, and most satisfactory as a teacher. She had no time to lose, she told Helen, the only one in the house for whom she cared; she would have her own way to make in the world. And Helen, who was fond of Jane Merrick too, if not quite so exclusively, had felt so sorry for her, and thought it such a dreadful thing that a girl should have "her own way to make in the world." It did not seem right, somehow, to her narrow experience and timid nature, with her own father and the distant Indian home, and all the wonderful possibilities of the future before her. She had often wondered, vaguely, how Jane would set about the first steps of her own way in the world, and now, all that was changed; Jane Merrick was going to an assured home, and it was to Helen's lot that it had fallen to do this terrible and unknown thing.

In the grave look that Jane bent upon Helen there was keen remembrance of this,

and, indeed, Jane was thinking that the back was in the case before her much less fitted to the burden than her own would have been. There was, however, no shifting that load; only the easing of it was possible.

"Don't let it get the better of you, darling," said Jane, who did not indulge freely in school-girl endearments of speech, and meant them when she used them, as she drew Helen's hands gently down and held them in her own; "there will be a way made for you, depend on it; that is a promise, you know: it may not be an easy way, but your feet will be set in it, and a lamp will be given to them."

Helen understood her only vaguely: she was orthodox, of course, as became a clergyman's daughter, but of real religion as the stay and guide of life she had not the least idea; and, when Jane said things of this kind, she just listened and let them pass.

"I have been thinking," continued Jane, gently stroking with thin brown fingers the soft pink and white hands she held, "that if you did not mind very much—though it would be a come-down for you, of course—my aunt might be able to find something that you would like more than teaching small children—"

"There cannot be anything I should like less," said Helen, looking up with a gleam of hope in her face; "dear Jane, tell me what you are thinking of, and what you mean by a 'come-down' for me."

"I mean that you are a lady, and that you might not like to have anything to do with business."

"Business?" repeated Helen. "What business?"

"The business that's done in a shop; selling things to people who want to buy them, or keeping account of the money that's paid for them."

"But I could not sell things, and I could not keep accounts," said Helen, ignoring the real question at issue from delicacy towards Jane, whose aunt she now concluded was "in business."

"Why not? you have always been first-rate at arithmetic; and anyone can learn to be a shopwoman. What I have in my mind is not just a common shop, either; though it will be very hard for a born lady like you to think well of it, no doubt. My aunt, dear Helen, is neither more nor less than a milliner and dressmaker, and until lately not a very prosperous one. She brought me up after my mother died, and placed me here three years ago to be

educated to teach others. But she has married a rich silk-mercator, an Englishman, though he has always lived in Paris, and she has set up a fine place there; it adjoins Mr. Morrison's silk warehouse, and I am going to live with her, and earn a salary as her assistant, to superintend her show-rooms, and speak English to her French, and French to her English customers. I did not tell you this before, because Miss Jerdane did not wish it known in the school that I was leaving the Hill House to go into a business. She gave me leave to tell you to-day."

"Oh, Jane, shall you like it?"

"Very much. I love my aunt, and owe everything to her. I shall be working for her, and not for strangers. I shall be fairly paid, and some day I hope I shall have a business of my own. I consider myself a very fortunate person, and I wish I could see you equally well off."

"But your aunt would not want me. What could I do there, even if—"

"Even if you could make up your mind to it? My idea may not be worth much, but I thought as Miss Jerdane is going away, and the lawyer gentlemen are not friends, you say, only business people whom you have no claim upon, that it just comes to this—my aunt and I are the only friends you have."

"Your aunt and you! Why, Jane, she never saw me."

A smile, which made it almost beautiful, lighted up Jane Merrick's face as she answered:

"What does that matter, dear? She knows all about you from me; and she thinks if you would come to us when you have to leave this, that even if you did not like to be employed in the business, it is very likely she would be able to find you a good place as companion to a lady, or in a nice French family; for she is very well known, and many of her customers are her friends."

"How very, very kind," said Helen, who began to understand Jane's meaning now; to see that she was offering her at least a temporary solution of that problem so terribly hard for her seventeen years old brain to work—of what was to become of her—that the kindly woman in business, who had been so good to her own orphan niece, was taking compassion on an orphan and a stranger. "How very, very kind," she repeated. "I don't know what to say; because, Jane, however much you try, you cannot make me believe that I could be of

any use to your aunt or you. I am not foolish enough to think that—"

"Miss Rhodes! Miss Rhodes!"

A little girl was running up the grassy slope towards where Jane and Helen sat, and calling to Helen as she ran.

The two friends started to their feet as the child came up to them.

"What is it, Bessie?" asked Jane; "you have run yourself out of breath."

"Never mind," said the little girl petulantly; "Miss Jerdane said I was to be quick, and tell Miss Rhodes to come in this very moment; she's wanted in the big drawing-room."

The small messenger caught Helen's arm and pulled at it to give effect to her commission.

"I—wanted?" said Helen to Jane.

"Who can it be?"

"Come along, Miss Rhodes; you're to come this very minute," said the child, and then she added as she tripped along on the grass by Helen's side: "It must be a gentleman that's come to see you, for I saw two such beautiful shiny brown horses before the door, when Miss Jerdane called me into the hall, and a man in bright boots and a leather belt was standing right in front of them. I should have liked to pat their nice noses; I'm not at all afraid of horses—are you, Miss Rhodes?"

Helen did not answer. As they walked quickly to the house, she and Jane exchanged perturbed looks. Helen was full of vague alarm, and yet she asked herself what bad news could now come to her? Nothing remained to her; what then was there that could be taken away?

A TRAVELLER'S TALES.

SOME SKINS.

I HAVE been looking through the published record of my travels in South Africa, to ascertain where I got the lynx-skin which lies before my hearth. This information is contained somewhere in the volume, but I have not patience to find it. Besides, it is only, at best, the name of a place, which has no further interest; I like to be accurate, however. The scene itself dwells complete in my recollection. I was walking with a comrade in the dry bed of a river, just as the sun peeped angrily above the dusty mountains. It gilt the topmost branches of the willows on each lofty bank, and transformed to cloth of gold the grimy waggon-tilts of a Boer party halted on a bluff. Their fires, just lighted,

puffed a whirl of azure smoke into the pale-green sky. Big dingy women, hideous from their mob-caps to their home-made slippers, drowsily washed pots or fractious children. Giant men strode to and fro in the glittering light, muffled to the throat in blankets, carrying pannikins of coffee. Cows lowed for their Hottentot milkmen, cattle bellowed, sheep bleated, impatient to be led afield.

We, far below, strolled in clear, cool shadow. Upon the crumbling cliffs of mud, wisps of wrack and faded rubbish hung on each projecting clod, twenty feet above us, tide-marks of the last deluge. They were but a few days old, though the sand in which we walked was dry and dusty. In shallow wells hollowed for the purpose, lay a pool of water slowly moving. There, if anywhere in the arid wilderness, would be secured the where-withal to vary our eternal breakfast of fried mutton-chops and dampers, chupatties, tortillas; I forget just now the Africander name for unleavened cakes. Birds flock at morning to the water-holes dug in the night by antelopes and jackals. But luck was not with us that day. After bagging a few franklin—partridges as they call them over yonder—we walked on until my comrade, who was lame, proposed returning. Just at that moment, a kordun called in a bend of the ravine ahead, and we stalked him cautiously. It was a long shot when at length he came in view. My friend took careful aim and fired both barrels. Quick as the sound, a fulvous slender creature leaped from behind a rock, and sped away, outstretched like a greyhound. I levelled my gun. But S—, more prudent, thrust it aside, and a puff of dust, a rattle of dry soil tumbling, marked where the shots had struck yards wide.

"You must restrain this impetuosity on the veldt," he said, laughing. "Unless you had killed the lynx, which is improbable, seeing that your gun was loaded with small shot, he would certainly have attacked us; and a wounded lynx is an ugly customer, let me tell you—none more, of our smaller animals, excepting a ratel."

It was annoying, but my experienced friend was right. After securing the kordun, we turned, and on the homeward walk he gave me several anecdotes displaying the courage and ferocity of the lynx. I think I noted one or two of them, but worn old memoranda are troublesome to read, and the tales are not particularly striking. "You do not mean," I said,

"that the funny little long-nosed ratel is as dangerous as this savage creature?"

"You will find that sportsmen here don't often meddle with the ratel. For one reason, he is comical, as you say; then, he is no use dead, and rather serviceable alive. But his safety is as often due to a man's natural disinclination to interfere with an animal which has such an awkward way of fighting, and staggers to the charge with half his weight of lead inside him. I once killed a ratel, it's many years ago, but I have never recovered the full use of my feet.

"It was the first time I had a shot-gun. My father was with me, but in returning home, he stayed to chat with a friend. I saw the ratel creeping round an ant-heap. He cantered off, not very fast, and I fired at an easy range. The brute turned heels over head, just as they do for hours at a time when they are playing; if you have seen ratels in a cage, you must have been amused by their performance. But it was no fun this time. He came back. I had no second barrel and no knife. It was awkward. The creature paused once, as if in pain, but never took his eyes off me. I did not think of running, but clubbed my gun, and stood, prepared to meet a spring. It was the oddest chance that no one had ever told me how the ratel fights. Almost every boy in the veldt knows it, but I didn't. To wait thus, expecting a leap breast-high, is to give him exactly the chance he wants. Hesitating not a second, the beast glided swiftly in, and seized my feet. I hacked him with the butt-end, kicked at him, shouted my loudest, but he gnawed with the pertinacity of a bull-dog. At every blow his teeth closed like a vice. I seized his long tail, wrenched and twisted it, but the ratel will not quit hold if he be cut in pieces. Not a moment, I suppose, the struggle lasted. The muscles of my instep were cut through, and I tumbled backwards—not full length, but against the ant-hill. That saved my life, probably. The brute let go, as it does when its victim drops, to spring upon his throat, and rip his stomach with his hind claws. But I lifted myself upon my elbows, and lay across the summit of the mound. That might only have prolonged the struggle, but my father ran up at the moment. I was many months in bed, and many more on crutches."

When the Boers heard that a lynx was in their neighbourhood, they were mightily

disturbed, and they sent out Hottentots to track it. No animal of its size is so destructive to sheep. A few days afterwards I received the spoil, which, mounted on skins of Central Asian foxes, is much admired in my drawing-room. These fox-skins, be it noted in passing, I bought at Simla for one rupee apiece; and I was badly cheated, as prices go there.

Some weeks or months after getting the lynx, I accompanied the late Mr. Lilienfelt, of Hopetown, on a ride through some property he possessed beyond the Hoek, the junction of the Vaal and Orange rivers. Amongst other interesting experiences of that tour, was a visit to a Basuto Kaffir kraal. There is no telling what the Zulus will prove to be, when their shrewd wits, high courage, and enterprising disposition are turned to peaceful objects. They may well show themselves as superior in their arts as in war. But, for the present, the Basuto is by far the most advanced of South African natives. Athletic, bold, industrious in his way, and emancipated in some degree from superstitious dependence on his chief, he pushes further and further into the territory of his neighbours. Little colonies have fixed themselves amongst Gaikas and Galekas on one side, amongst Batlapins and Barolongs, Corannas, and Griquas on the other. They commonly live on good terms with their hosts; if not, they hold their own by arms. John Katland, my worthy friend, was chief of a community like this, dwelling across the Orange. How he had drifted on to Mr. Lilienfelt's property he did not seem to know, but there his people sat, amidst well-cultivated fields of maize and Kaffir corn, yams, chilies, tomatoes, vegetables, and fruit. They had scores of horses, hundreds of oxen, thousands of sheep, bought, in the main, by sale of diamonds honestly acquired. Somewhere in this district was found the Star of South Africa. Our Basuto squatters had no such luck as that, but their quick eyes often discovered gems without specially seeking them. We saw a handsome waggon and twelve span of oxen bought with the proceeds of one diamond; the happy finder turned it up in digging the shallow foundation of his hut. And the flocks of sheep similarly acquired, the watches and guns, were freely indicated when Mr. Lilienfelt assured the Kaffirs that no royalty would be asked.

This little Basutoland is not more engaging than any other districts in its vicinity. I am not qualified to speak of

South Africa as a whole, because I saw but a small portion of that enormous country, and the Eastern provinces, Natal and Kaffraria, are said to be much more picturesque. My experience is limited to the veldt lands betwixt Capetown and Pniel, seven hundred miles of the dreariest, dustiest, least interesting scenery in all the world, to be described as habitable. In what is called "pasture," each blade of grass springs at some inches distant from its neighbour. To a stranger's eye, there is very small difference between desert and fertile ground; what distinction he observes is all to the advantage of the former. Glorious flowers there are in both, though short-lived, but the desert has most in number as in beauty. There is not what may be called a tree for scores of miles, excepting, very rarely, the avenue of an old-established and luxurious colonist. Only on the hills or in the kloofs springs a bush. The land rolls in gentle undulations, too soft, too uniform of tint to break the appearance of dead level. The mountains which everywhere intersect it are barriers of sandstone, abrupt, inaccessible, even at summit as at base. Beautiful effects of shadow, smoke-blue and light orange-pink, one sees upon the crags at morn and evening, but the veldt rests unchanged, grey-green, banded sometimes with stripes of yellow weed. Its only incident is the shadow of a passing bird, high-poised in air on gilded pinions, or the whirl of a sandstorm. Then, in truth, if the tempest obscure the crimson radiance of sunset, one beholds a scene unparalleled on earth. Hell itself seems to have broken bars, and flames horrible to the zenith. But even this spectacle, if thrilling, is not pleasant, and the veldt of South Africa must be pronounced, upon the whole, to be the least engaging landscape occupied by man.

We have heard a very great deal lately of Kaffir barbarism, dirt, indolence, and so on. I hold no brief for any savage, but I am prepared to argue that for cleanliness and comfort the ways of Basuto life put to shame the habits of our own labouring classes. Dwellings better fitted for the climate European ingenuity could not invent. Round in shape, heavily thatched, abundantly furnished with skins, which alone divide the inner space, suspended from the radiating beams, they are dark and cool in summer, warm in the shrewd winter chills. A six-foot fence surrounds the hut, and its close wattling excludes

the neighbours' curiosity. In this yard, so to call it, every domestic operation is carried on. The Basuto will not even cook indoors. His floor of powdered ants' nests is watered every day, and swept with brooms which score the moist earth in patterns fanciful but regular. Vermin have no chance of existence there. The inmates, men, women, and children, wear little clothing, but the flesh they display in guileless unconsciousness is clean and smooth as brown satin. Pretty faces are by no means uncommon in a Basuto village, and perfect figures are a rule with the young of either sex.

John Katland proved to be a smiling stalwart fellow, with a broad determined face. Our visit surprised him in the act of mending some complicated machinery of sticks and strings designed to catch rock-rabbits—the *dossie*—whereof the excreta forms a valuable export from the Cape. He wore a superb kaross of silver-jackal skins, for the sun was not yet warm. Slipping this cloak from his left shoulder, just as the negroes of the West Coast signify respect, he led us in. Mr. Lilienfelt began to talk of grazing rights and diamonds, water-claims and diamonds, diamonds and labour at the Fields. The chief spoke English very well, and the conversation had abundant interest, but that kaross fascinated me. The skins, some thirty or more, were perfectly matched, and scraped to the softness of a glove. Not knowing what price would tempt a man who owned such thriving crops and such large herds, I said to one of the Kaffirs who had thronged to see us:

"Where did the chief collect such a fine lot of jackals? It must have taken him a long time."

"Yes," he answered, laughing; "but John Katland he got all kaross one night."

This seemed to promise a story, and the hero himself related it after a time. He was present at the breaking of the dam above Victoria, an event which has seldom been equalled for dramatic horror. The chief was returning from Beaufort. To that distant market he had carried a quantity of peltries, mostly otter. Regular "Kaffir traders" will buy none but the commonest skins, unless they get them monstrously cheap, and Katland knew a better trick of business. Beaufort is the outfitting place for the small traders or large pedlars, who trek about the veldt, dealing at the lonely farms and hamlets. They exchange their goods, as a rule, for

sheep or wool. Many of the animals are lost in driving them about, and many others reach the market sickly and exhausted. Katland bartered his otter-skins for a large flock of these invalids, and leisurely commenced his homeward march. Such a speculation entails just that sort of work which Kaffirs cheerfully perform, and Europeans dislike. It demands, above all things, vigilance, for the jackals gather from every side, smelling the weakly lambs, and accompany the drove to the utmost confines of their district, when another pack, as eager and as pertinacious, replace those which fall off. In protecting their flock, Kaffirs will undergo much real hardship without a murmur.

The neighbourhood of Victoria was rather famous for the enterprising spirit of its jackals. Two years later I myself was dogged by them in a long night march in a way ludicrous but not quite comfortable.

Katland outspanned above the kloof, and prepared for extra watchfulness. He had with him ten sturdy youths, who could generally be trusted to keep awake during their sentry. But there had been a wedding in the village, and a ball was given that night. It was the 27th of February, 1870. The Basutos became excited at the sounds of festivity which reached their ears, borne on the wind. The chief himself yielded to this temptation, and he clambered down to observe the white man feast. All his boys off duty slipped after him unseen, and they had equal luck in returning, two or three hours later. But the mischief was done. They had found liquor down below, and when their turn came to relieve the watchers, they could not keep awake. Stealthily and swiftly a dozen bold jackals crept within the line. The sheep burst into simultaneous outcry, and ran together, but a number of them had been cut off. These broke away, all the pack of jackals after them, pattering down the kloof. John Katland leaped from his bed, but it was too late. As he stood on the brink of the declivity the snarling and swearing of the animals faintly rose from the depths of that black gorge, mingled with the strains of music. Suddenly a roar as of thunder—the cliff beneath him shook. In a second the kloof was well-nigh full of tearing, bellowing, raging water. All Victoria down below had been twinkling with lights, exposed for this joyful occasion. Before Katland could draw his breath one-half of them went out, one-half of the village

was swept away amidst a din so awful that the cry of a drowning population rose unheard. The great drain had burst, eaten through by land crabs.

A terrible night was that for the survivors. They were only those, old people mostly, who had left the ball-room, or had not gone to it. Nearly all the youth of Victoria had perished. A glance showed the extent of the disaster, for the lights still shone cheerfully in every house standing, but their rays fell broken upon shapeless wreck and hurrying water. In the morning, bride and bridegroom were found dead, locked in each other's arms. The dead lay scattered for miles down the channel of the flood. It had all now passed, leaving but a trickle through the slime and slush and ruin.

Katland took no share in these researches, but he also was hunting for lost property, and vengeance. At one bend of the defile six of his mangled lambs were found, and thirteen silver jackals; in all, he secured fifty-one skins of the latter, and nineteen of the gold variety, besides wool and hides of oxen more than he could carry. It was not theft. The mourning inhabitants of Victoria would have let them all rot. So, for the loss of fifteen sickly sheep, Katland obtained some scores of hides, hundreds of fleeces, and the kaross which I admired. He sold it to me for three pounds.

I made another visit to the Hoek some while after. A country boy who has been pent for years in the grimmest city slum may feel, on some too brief holiday, what we diggers experienced, leaving the burnt-up, treeless, colourless fields for a glimpse of running water and fresh foliage. The river scenery of Griqualand is no marvel. For a hundred yards on either bank are trees—that is all. Neither there nor anywhere may one lie upon the turf, and smell the fresh perfume of an English field. One laboured through white sand, ankle-deep, and the only flowers at that time of year were flaring stars of misembryanthemum and yellow tendrils of cassia. But there were big green trees, and twittering birds in flocks, and bees, and gurgling water. The Hoek also offered clean beds, various foods, and a pleasant welcome. I liked the solitary spot. It amused me to sit and watch the travellers arriving from parts savage and mysterious, to hail the ferry-boat. Kaffirs they were generally, or Griquas, trekking with their herds and waggons full of produce to the Fields. It

amused me to see the diggers, bloodshot of eye, travel-stained, imperious, with shirt-sleeves rolled to the shoulder, and scarred from the wrist up with boils, inflamed by poisonous dust. The pick and spade, the pannikin at waist, and butcher's knife behind, marked them for "prospectors." At Mr. G——'s store they purchased flour and bil-tongue for their adventurous journey, with some chops for a present meal, which they prepared forthwith at a fire of sticks. That store also was an agreeable lounge. Upon its shelves, hanging from its roof, depending from its walls, was found every article of semi-savage commerce. The imports were less varied, but more interesting. Those big chests on which one sat would scarcely close for their wealth of ostrich feathers, neatly sorted out and labelled, from the "prime first bloods," through a long catalogue of classes to the humble "duster." Some were filled with skins of the more valuable sorts, otters, lynxes, maned lions, leopards of superior marking. The lynx-skin is supposed, by blacks and whites alike, to guarantee the wearer against rheumatism. In the safest of his drawers, Mr. G—— had a pretty show of diamonds, bought from John Katland's people and others dwelling across the river; of sapphires and rubies, too, unless he was mistaken, which I fear he was. At this shop, over this counter, Swartzboy offered the "star" for two hundred pounds. In Mr. G——'s absence, his assistant dared not risk such a sum. So Swartzboy carried his treasure on and sold it to Niekirk for four hundred pounds, half cash, half goods. The same night, Messrs. Lilienfelt bought it for twelve thousand pounds, and now the Countess of Dudley wears it.

One evening as I fished in the shade beside the landing-place, a horseman on the further side holloed for the "pont." A person, not obliging naturally, learns to help a fellow-creature in the wilderness, where he himself so often is dependent upon others. The diggings are not a bad school in some respects. I raised my voice, shouting for Louis, and presently that athletic individual knocked out his pipe, emptied his glass, and replied. Meantime, three waggons heaved rumbling to the shore, pulled through the sand by a dozen bullocks each. One by one they were ferried across, and several horses, thin and melancholy, followed with their master. I had recognised his business at a glance. The panels of the largest waggon

were decorated with pictures of lions, elephants, bushmen, and Heaven knows what, executed in the roughest style, and horribly defaced by weather. We strolled to the town, and Mr. G—— recognised my new acquaintance with effusion. He was a young Dutchman, from Holland, who had struck rather an unusual path in the Kaffir trade. Finding the eastern and northern "circuits" overdone, he resolved to try Namaqualand, a country which is called The Great Desert, by supremacy over the Karroo and the Gouph, not bad specimens of desolation for their size. Namaqualand is inhabited solely by Bushmen or by broken clans of Bechuanas, variously called, who have sunk almost to the Bushman level. It abounds with game—for the Cape desert is quite a peculiar region—but there are not inhabitants enough to collect the hides and skins and feathers, even if they had been sufficiently advanced to comprehend trade. This young fellow employed himself in forming a "connection," and he had been not unsuccessful on the whole, during several years of trading.

Upon this occasion, however, ill-luck pursued him from the first. The season was exceptionally dry, and exceptionally pestilential for animals, as it was throughout the colony. After an absence of only four months, he had returned despairing. No fewer than seventeen horses had been left to die or recover under care of native chiefs, and the mortality of his oxen was terrible. For weeks at a time, man and beast had found nothing to drink except the sap of roasted melons, and very little to eat. Nor was this all. Several years of drought had thinned the game, especially the valuable kinds. Ostriches had mostly run off to happier pastures, and those which remained were poor and sickly. One would not have believed that the trip, after all, had been so disastrous, observing the enormous quantity of fur and feathers which the trader produced next day for Mr. G——'s valuation. But there are many profits to be paid before an ostrich-feather or a lion's skin reaches its ultimate possessor, and I doubt not that our enterprising friend told the truth. He would scarcely have returned with half a cargo had the prospect not been bad.

Amongst the tumbled heap of skins were the spolia opima of three maneless lions, especially large and well-preserved. I asked Mr. G—— to buy them for me, and he obtained them at a pound apiece. After

supper, Mrs. G—— inquired laughingly for the souvenirs which had been promised her. "Dear madam," said the hunter, in his pleasant old-fashioned English, "I will tell you the truth. When I killed the lions which Mr. B—— has been kind enough to purchase, I said in my heart, here are goods which Mrs. G—— will value, for her friend won them with his own hand. She has furs and feathers better than I bring from Namaqualand. Those skins I will give her! But misfortunes overtook me. I am poor, and in debt. When this gentleman offers me three pounds, after a short combat I say to myself, 'Mrs. G—— will be kind as usual, and patient. She will let me search for another something to please her.' Is it not so?"

"I must show myself worthy of your good opinion," laughed our hostess. "But don't kill any more lions for me. It is a kind of sport in which the lion brings off a souvenir almost as often as the man."

"Oh, no! I ran no danger at all, and I will tell you how it was.

"You know that I have sought the Bushman's poison for years. Often they promised to show it me, how it was made, but they ever cheated. Some cooked one thing, some cooked another, but always it was the wrong thing. You will know that I had paid much cash for these futile humbugs, and my patience failed—one does not like to be mocked by Bushmen. At length the head-chief of the Damaras told me something. He said: 'It is truth that very few of us know how to make the poison, for it is sgundru [fetish]. First of all you must find a tchisgundra [obi man]. I, even I, do not know the secret. Any man may bruise puff-adders' heads, but the poison is not there.' So I despaired, for the obi man does not live where the trader goes.

"But this last year in the desert has been terrible, as I have had the honour to explain. The poor Bush folks could scarcely keep their souls alive, and they trekked to all parts seeking water and game. The obi man does not move. He has his dwelling by a spring, where nobody comes unless for business; but the springs were all dry. One time I was making a long stretch from one melon bed to another. In the heat of the afternoon, when my poor horse lolled a dry tongue six inches from his jaws, we met an ugly man, painted and shrivelled. He had been lying in the bush, but on seeing us he rose and came forward tottering. My Bush boys cried out, and went

behind the waggon. The poor wretch caught my knee in either hand, pointed to his mouth, all dry and bleeding, and fell. Melons ready roasted were in the waggon, and I gave him to drink. 'Another,' he cried huskily, 'another!' His life was saved. 'Show me the Bushman's poison,' I said, and he answered 'Yes.' 'Swear it by your fetish!' and he swore. So I gave him melons, and carried him to the halting-place.

"After a few days, for he had left all his things at home, he made me poison. We went together for the purpose of obtaining what plants and materials are used. I do not know everything by name, but I can find and mix them. Besides the plants, there is a lizard, several snakes, and large quantities of a small hairy caterpillar which feeds upon the camel-thorn. All is there, in my waggon, and I am forwarding the parcel to Leyden for analysis.

"The stuff was cooked, but because I had often been deceived I was incredulous. We had come near the Lake Ngani, where there are lions. I said to the obi man, 'See now! We will take a bow, and we will wait for wild beasts by the fley. If your poison is not good, and I die, these Kaffirs, who fear not your charms, will slice you into bits.' He answered, 'Good,' and we set out at dusk.

"What a foolish, wicked thing to do!" cried Mrs. G—. "Hunt lions with one of those little Bushmen's bows! You might as well shoot a pop-gun against elephants!"

"Indeed, the Bushmen are not so silly as you might think, dear madam. They rely not upon their arrows, but upon their venom, and see how crafty is their way of hunting. If the bow were strung to hurl its shaft with force, the lion would be very angry, and would rend the hunter before he died. They use a little weak bow, a little arrow, and they shoot delicately. The wild beast roars and bounds with pain, but his wound is no more than skin deep. He tears out the slender reed, looks about him, roars again, and drinks quietly, for he credits that a thorn has pricked him. In three or four minutes the poison begins to work. The lion has forgot that incident. He walks away, then falls, and fights, and dies, his enemy standing a few yards off unnoticed. There is another thing also, madam. The poison does not keep long. Then there is much fraud amongst those who manufacture it, and a poor man is seldom sure that it will produce the due effect. On

these accounts also he would not anger the lion with a great blow. Oh, the Bushman is clever; I assure you!"

"But you don't know how to shoot an arrow!"

"Pardon me! I went with the obi man to the fley, and presently the animals arrived. One, two, three, I shot, and they died quietly. The obi man took out their hearts, their livers, and their galls. I said to him, 'What will you make of them?'

"The hearts,' he answered, 'I shall dry, and those who eat that medicine will have courage like the lion. The liver and the brain will give me long life, health, and wisdom for myself. The galls will make poison for enemies, which I shall sell.'

"I left the old sorcerer at the fley, mixing his charms. Believe me, dear madam, you shall have a dozen lion-skins when I return from my next journey."

AN UNEQUAL BARGAIN.

A STORY IN THREE PARTS. PART I.

"It is a bargain, then?" she said, laying her hand in his.

He raised the soft, womanly helpful hand to his lips, and held it there a moment.

"Yes; it is a bargain. I give my life into your hands; they are hands to whose guidance no man need fear to trust."

But Mrs. Meadows was in an eminently practical humour this sunny April afternoon, and of sentiment would she none.

So in a few moments Mr. Vere Urquhart found himself seated on a comfortable lounge in that pretty inner drawing-room of hers, drinking tea out of an old Capo di Monte tea-cup, and listening to words of common-sense counsel at the same time.

Many men would have looked upon the position as an enviable one; for there was no more popular woman in London just then than Mrs. Meadows, and no pleasanter house than her villa in that part of South Kensington, which boasts of so much greenery that it is said by enthusiastic persons to be "almost like living in the country, you know."

Popularity—at all events, the kind of popularity that is worth having—does not in London grow like Jonah's gourd. People have to become known, to become liked, to make themselves felt as a social influence in one way or other, before they are looked upon as "very nice people to know."

Mrs. Meadows was a widow, rich, clever, handsome: all good gifts for a woman who

wishes to gather about her a pleasant, cultivated "set." As a widow she is more entirely the possession of her friends, from being independent in action, and subject to no man's whims and fancies; as rich, she can entertain, and render her surroundings artistic and beautiful; as clever, she can attract eminent men and cultured women into the charmed precincts of her circle; as handsome—well, every woman, maid, wife, or widow, is the better for a fair share of natural attractions.

To all these good gifts Mrs. Meadows added a subtle charm of manner, which could (when she chose) be well-nigh irresistible. Add to this that every influence she possessed was used for good and not for ill, and you have a very fair idea of the woman an episode in whose eventful life this story aims at telling.

Plenty of people of position called upon her soon after she came to the Kensington villa—was she not a distant cousin of that light of fashion, Lady Clara Lumley?

But for a long time they did not understand her, nor, to tell the truth, altogether like her.

Her household consisted of herself and her dame de compagnie, one Mrs. Jerningham, an ancient dame of silent ways and eccentric dress.

This worthy woman appeared to have but two salient personal characteristics. One was a small hand-bag, made of straw, and finished off round the neck with a frill that drew together with strings. This receptacle always contained a store of soft biscuits, which Mrs. Jerningham ate continuously and without effort, like a rabbit, carrying on the work of the moment at the same time. The other strong point in her individuality was a blind unquestioning devotion to Ashton Meadows.

A strange name for a woman—Ashton; and yet somehow it suited the owner, and no one seemed inclined to find fault with it.

At first—just at first—there were plenty of criticisms passed upon the young widow.

She "did" her hair in a way that, however becoming, was not the fashion. This "way" was to twist its dusky luxuriance into a crown upon her graceful head—a head never by any chance adorned by any other adjunct than this Nature-given diadem.

From under a serene brow, this woman's eyes looked at you calm, steadfast; at times radiant, at others sad. They were eyes of truest hazel; just the tint of the

rich ripe nut, as, close-clipt in its sheath of russet-green, it sways in the autumn sun.

When Ashton Meadows laughed, showing a gleam of the small even white teeth that were the envy of many a younger woman, those eyes of hers laughed too, seeming to fill with flashing golden lights. When they were grave, meeting yours wistful and pure as those of a child—well, if you were about to try and put a film of false colouring on something someone had said or done, if you were trying to cast the first stone at a woman's reputation, or to laugh at a man's ill-doing, you were inclined to halt in your speech, and resolve to keep silence for the time being.

Mrs. Meadows was slight in figure, and yet by no means lacking in a dignity that at all times held at arm's length those whom she chose to keep at such a distance.

She was utterly, absolutely unconventional. If a thing was good and right in her own eyes, she did it; heeding not at all what others might think of it.

At first these little eccentricities were commented upon somewhat severely.

Later on, people said, "But she is American, you know," taking the assertion as a full and complete extenuation of anything she might do or say.

It did not do to be too critical when a woman gave such delightful réunions as Mrs. Meadows; and, after all, even the average female British Philistine does not care for any one to be as good as herself. If this were so, what, indeed, would become of that distinctive refulgence with which she shines—at all events, in her own estimation?

It became also an established fact that nice men, clever men, celebrated men, whom everyone was proud to know, thought it worth their while to cultivate first the acquaintance, and then the friendship of the fair Canadian.

Under these circumstances, it will be readily understood that mothers with daughters hanging heavy on hand, were effusively delighted when they could persuade Mrs. Meadows to act as chaperon.

"Matilda is really devoted to you," one matron would say with a confidential air, as though she were betraying some family secret.

"Laura can talk of nothing but your singing," quoth another. "She is, if I may be absolved of speaking partially, a true lover of music. By the way, if

you are going to that charming concert," and so on, and so on.

Ashton Meadows took it all very quietly. She was no fool; rather a woman of quick perceptions, of sensitive intuitions.

People set her down at twenty-six or so. In reality she was nearly five years older.

Of one thing everyone was certain. No young aspirant to matrimonial honours need fear her as a rival.

She liked the society of clever and cultured men—what intellectual woman does not? Here and there she had brought her powers of personal influence to bear upon a man's life, and turned it this way or that—in whatever way, always in a way that was better and higher than the way in which she found it. But she had done these things in the bonds of friendship, not of love. Before she had been three years in London, even mothers, with marriageable sons who were past their first youth, and who had aspirations after domestic felicity and fireside enjoyments with a woman who could afford to maintain both herself and them, ceased to be overpoweringly expansive to Ashton Meadows, and expatiated no more to her upon the beauty and generosity of the natures of the sons in question.

Of what avail for an anxious mother to say: "Ah! my boy only wants a guiding hand to be all that the fondest heart could wish;" when, all the while, the widow's golden-bronze eyes looked at her, calmly conscious of the fact that the "boy" in question not only wanted a "guiding hand" but a banker as well?

Of Mrs. Meadows's past life nothing was known beyond the fact that she was the widow of a Boston merchant; that she was herself a Canadian by birth, and descended from one of those old English families whose ancestors settled in the New World a century or two back.

This much Lady Clara—munching out her words between those nut-crackers, her aristocratic nose and chin—informed a listening world. But no more. She had nothing to say about her "cousin" Ashton's married life, or the individual whose name she bore.

For the curious there was therefore only Mrs. Jerningham to fall back upon, and anyone might about as well have taken up a position in front of the Sphinx, and expected that stony image of the bland countenance to speak, as hope to get anything out of that "good Jerningham," as Lady Clara called her. Indeed, any approach to

intimacy with the lady who was always knitting and nibbling biscuits, invariably resulted in the aspirant being asked to go upstairs, and "look at her caps;" an appalling request before which more than one inquisitive matron had been known to flee. For Jerningham's caps were things fearful to behold, even seen singly on the owner's head. What effect they might have had on anyone when seen collectively it would be hard to say. Making them—unmaking them—and remaking—were the chief joys of Jerningham's life, and she would hover round an elderly lady with a peculiarly tempting head-gear, like a butterfly round a flower, making believe to bring her tea, cake, and other refreshments, while all the time she was only taking the pattern of her cap for reproduction in less ambitious materials.

Some people said the poor old soul was "not all there;" others that she was "not so simple as she pretended to be." But on one point the whole world (i.e., the world of the "set" who revolved round Ashton Meadows) were agreed: Jerningham had no existence apart from her "friend." In presence of that friend she was personally obliterated. She watched the lithe graceful figure as it moved here and there, anxious only to learn if she could anticipate some wish of the one creature on earth who was precious exceedingly in her eyes. For Jerningham never even made believe to care for anyone else. Sometimes, at the sound of a distant step or the banging of a door, this strange woman would look round with a frightened scared expression on her dull and massive features, but, catching Ashton's glance, and meeting her smile, would nod her head, smile too, and return to her knitting contentedly.

"Depend upon it, my dear, that old woman knows more than her prayers," said one to the other.

Nevertheless, it came to be an established fact that Mrs. Meadows was a charming person to know, and that her open Thursday evenings were "really quite too delightful."

For time brought to light the fact that added to her many other wondrous social qualifications, Ashton Meadows possessed the priceless gift of a voice so soft and sweet, so mellow and deep, so capable of passion and pathos, that to hear her sing was a rare treat to the lover of music. For the rest, people who neither loved nor understood music as an art, raved about

her voice because it was the right thing to do.

She sang but rarely, and never more than once in the same evening. Indeed, it was an understood thing that no one should ask her to deviate from this self-made rule.

She was a woman absolutely without coquetry or self-consciousness, therefore her resolves were absolute, and her words, few and softly spoken, meant exactly what they conveyed, and neither more nor less.

No one could enter into all social and intellectual pleasures more than did Ashton Meadows; no one could lend a hand in making life a pleasant thing to others more heartily. As for her own life, it appeared to satisfy her completely as it was.

The truth was she had come to England to forget a cruel past. "That good Jerningham" was one of the familiar figures of that past; a past that Mrs. Meadows had managed to bury deep down, and trample the earth hard upon its ghastly face. She had passed through the fire of pain. The ordeal had but refined and perfected a naturally beautiful character. Yet she shrank from the thought of calling once more into life the deeper sympathies, the keener capabilities of joy and of pain that fate had deadened in her heart. Hence she had willed it, that though good men and true should call her friend and counsellor, none should ripen from friend to lover.

She had lived her life, so she said to her own heart, and had found life a bitter thing.

The bitterness—not of death—but of life, was past, life in its fullest, most impassioned sense. All its lesser beauties might be hers; and she gathered them with no unwilling hand. Thus had run the pleasant even current of her life; but now a ripple was stirring its quiet surface.

Just three months ago Lady Clara had said to her: "I want to introduce to you a protégé of mine—Vere Urquhart—a lazy good-for-nothing fellow, but full of esprit, my dear, and deliciously conceited, which is the women's fault, not his own."

Ashton bent her head as a sign of acquiescence. She had already had several of Lady Clara's "pets" presented to her, and found them anything but charming. In fact, her ladyship was always running after something new, and as a natural consequence occasionally caught something unpleasant.

"But where has this *rara avis* been all

this while?" said Ashton, when she could get a word in edgeways.

"To the Pyramids, or Jerusalem, or some of those out-of-the-way places. He lost heavily, so they say."

"Betting?"

"Yes, I suppose so; and he went away to retrench—do the economical sort of thing, you know."

"He has recovered, then, from this attack of economy?"

"Oh, yes; he paid up and all that sort of thing, and he's come back really more delightful than ever."

Two days later Mrs. Meadows met Vere Urquhart at Lady Clara's. In a week she felt as if she must have known him all her life,

He, on his part, had come to the conclusion that Lady Clara's "cousin" was the most cultivated woman he had ever met. There was also a feeling upon his part—and a feeling that grew—that he should not like those golden-brown eyes to look upon him with disapproval.

"You ought to be grateful to me for giving you such a charming Gamaliel at whose feet to sit—very pretty feet they are too, sir; all American women have pretty feet," said Lady Clara, tapping her protégé playfully with her fan; "you'll get many a bundle of dried sage by way of advice, I can tell you. She's older than she looks is my cousin Ashton."

Her ladyship delighted in saying Mrs. Meadows was "older than she looked;" she delighted, too, in calling her "cousin," though great-niece once removed would have been a more truthful description of the relationship between the two.

"You will make me afraid of Mrs. Meadows," said Vere, with that winsome smile of his, that had so much that was boyish about it still, in spite of the rather hard and fast life that lay behind him.

"No one is ever afraid of Ashton—whom she likes," said Lady Clara.

There was a subtle shade of flattery in those three last words which went home as it was meant to do.

Lady Clara was a cross old woman, with a nut-cracker face, by no means innocent of rouge and blanc de perle. She wore a wig, and munched her words, but the most venerable old stump of a tree in the forest has been a sapling once. Lady Clara had been young once, and a beauty, too, and there had been a story in her life of which Vere's father had been the hero.

He had married someone else, and she had married someone else. But she had not forgotten—what woman ever does forget the man who has taught her heart to beat?

And now she wanted to do her old love's son a good turn.

He was like one being drifted out upon a rapid river—a river bordered with flowers and sparkling in the sunshine, yet in which were unknown depths and cruel whirlpools. A hand was needed to hold him back, and Lady Clara had found one to serve her purpose.

"I expect you two to be great friends," she said, one day in Ashton's drawing-room.

And assuredly they answered her expectations. They did become friends, close and fast.

Vere, conscious of a powerful influence closing about him, girded against it at times; kept away from Ashton, and drank no tea out of the *Capo di Monte* cups. Then "that good Jerningham" took to sitting with her biscuits and her knitting at the window watching for him; and when he came her face was one broad smile of welcome. A contrast truly to the mistress of the house, who greeted him exactly as if she had seen him only the day before.

He never asked himself if the quiet-voiced woman who always seemed to him part of the flower-scented shaded room in which he was wont to see her, had been watching with her heart, though not with her eyes. He never thought of Ashton Meadows in any other light than that of a kindred mind, and one who wrought him good—not ill, as some others had done. Gradually a great change came over the man. He grew daily more and more dissatisfied with himself, with his life in the past, his aims in the present, his prospects in the future.

This is how he came to be sitting in that pretty drawing-room where we just saw him, and where we have left him far too long.

Tall, fair, grey-eyed, with a clear-cut face, boyish, like his smile, for all his six-and-twenty years; gifted with a marvellous charm of word and of manner, chivalrous to every woman alike—old or young, fair or not fair; impulsive, utterly incautious, generous, brave, where could one find a man so capable of great things, so likely to end in being nothing at all? The character that is wanting in stability is always, of all others, the most liable to

err, the most open to influence, bad as well as good.

Yet one character supplements another: and Vere thought that in Ashton Meadows he had found all things that were most lacking in himself. He had once heard a man say that she was "like music, and music that was never out of tune, and in which there was never a false note."

He thought the description good, but incomplete. For were there not grand deep tones in this mental music—chords that spoke to you of bygone aspirations, great ambitions, that brought before you the best moments that you had lived through, obliterating the worst?

"And you really want-me to take up my old profession—to become a working-bee of the hive?"

Vere was thoughtfully stirring his second cup of tea, and looking at his hostess at the same time.

"You can hardly call a thing your 'profession' in which you did absolutely nothing."

"I was 'called,' at all events."

"Yes, but you did not 'answer,' did you?" she added, with one of those faint sweet smiles with which she now and again sugared hard words that had to be said.

"Well, no; you see——"

"That uncle of yours died, and left you—what was it?—seven hundred a year to live upon."

"I do not live upon it, Mrs. Meadows."

"I did not suppose you did, as a matter of fact. Indeed, you told me once, a long time ago, that you were always in debt, often in difficulties; that is not my idea of a manly life."

"Nor is it mine."

"A man ought, at all events, to try to live up to his own ideal."

"Am I not—better still—going to try to live up to yours?"

Some deep feeling seemed to be stirred in Ashton's breast; and, as was usually the case with her when much moved, she was silent.

So he went on speaking, looking very much like a chidden child who is determined to be good, but realises that the goodness will cost a price.

"There won't be many more of these pleasant, quiet, lazy afternoons for me," he said, looking absurdly melancholy. "No more tea out of these dear little cups."

"I shall be glad to think you are doing

something better. You will write to me, and tell me how you get on, and, when you get a cause to plead, I shall come and hear you speak; besides, there will be the Sundays, you know."

"Yes, with all the world absorbing you. I never was fond of sharing the good things of life with other people. My nature is radically, hopelessly selfish."

She set her own "dear little cup" down upon the table at her elbow. She did not care to go on holding it. Her hand was not quite steady, and it might rattle in the saucer, and so betray her.

"Jerningham will miss you sadly: she is your most devoted slave," she said laughingly.

Laughter is a capital cover for sentiment.

"Where is that worthy woman to-day?" he asked, answering to her whim at once.

"She is upstairs, making a new cap."

"She is always making a new cap."

"Yes; I should not be surprised if she leaves it in her will that they are all, the whole army of them, to be buried with her. This one is to be something quite 'beyond beyond.' I daresay she will be down in it directly—for your edification."

Then her mood changed again. There was a spirit of restlessness upon her to-day; a deep disquiet of the spirit, of which she would fain hide every trace from her companion.

It was all settled now—the point upon which she had been so anxious, over which she had wearied and prayed.

This man, who had grown to be in some strange and subtle way a part of her life, was to turn his back upon the old unworthy life, was to catch the infection of ambition for himself from the ambition that reigned in her own heart for him. He was to walk in the way in which she would have him walk; he was to make a name and a position for himself in the sight of all men. What, then, was this cold misgiving that chilled her soul, even as she spoke words of hope and cheer, as she thanked God for strengthening her hands to the work of making a life more worthy, more full of manly purpose? She did not wish to speak of deep things any more just then; and yet, in spite of herself, the conversation drifted on to serious ground again. She talked of his past life; of his passing (always passing) resolves after better things; of the enchanted cup that the world about him had offered to his lips.

"But, Vere," she said at last, her grave

eyes meeting his; "when you thought about the future—for we all do that sometimes—what colours did it take for you? What did you mean to do—when you had run through all your capital, I mean, and the bitter end stared you in the face?"

"Marry an heiress, I suppose," he said, with an air of that "delicious conceit" which Lady Clara often avowed to be in her eyes "divine."

"Wouldn't that be rather hard on the heiress?"

He laughed uneasily. He had forgotten, with a lack of tact very unusual in so refined a man of society, that he spoke in the presence of a wealthy woman.

Something in Ashton's voice—it had grown so dark that he could hardly see her face, only the little graceful head, like a silhouette between himself and the window—made him conscious of the fact that his words had hit hard.

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly, rising, and crossing to her side: "I did not mean——"

"I know you did not," she answered, putting up her hand to his.

"You are cold," he said, and held it closely a moment. She drew it away.

"Yes," she said. "It is an east wind to-day, I think. I am always cold when there is an east wind."

Just then Jerningham came in, arrayed in all the glories of the new cap—a structure "fearfully and wonderfully made."

The poor lady's nose was very red from bending over her work so long, but her face was radiant as Mrs. Meadows stirred the fire into a gleeful blaze, and the astounding head-gear in which her soul delighted was displayed before Urquhart's admiring eyes.

Before long he took his leave—not without some reluctant sadness, either. He had had so many pleasant hours in that pretty room, and henceforth they would be so few and far between!

As for Ashton Meadows, she was standing by the fire as he left the room, and remained there, silent, immovable, like one who listens too intently to be conscious of any other sense than that of hearing.

She stood so till the quiet firm footfall of her departing guest had passed down the low wide stairs to the hall, till the door below had closed.

Then she drew a long breath—a breath like a shiver—and rang for some hot tea for Mrs. Jerningham.

"I was afraid I should not get it done before he went away. I hope he liked it," said that industrious woman, giving herself over wholly and intensely to the refreshment in hand.

"Your cap, dear?" said Ashton, with a ready and kindly sympathy. "Yes, I am sure he did."

Then, leaving her companion smiling over her tea and bread-and-butter, she strolled away to the end of the room, where, in a deep recess, stood her piano.

"Don't play like that, my dear," said a voice behind her, ten minutes later. "Oh, my dear, it makes me feel like we used to feel—both of us, you know—long ago, when you used to lay your head in my lap, and cry, oh, so bitterly!"

And here Mrs. Jerningham's arm stole round Ashton's shoulders.

LIGHT IN THE EAST.

THE wind is in the east, a keen biting wind, but with the sun shining, and bells ringing for church in pleasant confusion. The wide High Street of Whitechapel has an almost cheerful aspect. And here and there in the long rows of closely shuttered shop fronts—not cheerful objects in themselves, even though relieved by bright placards, promising unreserved sales, bankrupt stocks, and fearful sacrifices—here and there little nests of sunshine in the way of fruit shops piled with oranges and apples, all scarlet and ruddy gold, nests that are guarded by bright oriental birds—pretty Jewesses with braided locks; braided too and plaited into knots and tassels over the broad smooth brows; so many Queens of Sheba condescending for the nonce to dispense to the roughs of Whitechapel their three-a-penny oranges and rosy-cheeked apples.

The tram-car rolls easily along, picking up or setting down a passenger—a bright-looking girl on her way to the Sunday-school; a stout matron in velvet and ruby ribands with a little tribe of children fat and rosy; a slightly shabby but still cheerful old gentleman, who may be a decayed liveryman, going out to eat his Sunday's dinner with his son-in-law at Bow, an old gentleman who tenderly picks up the fat and rosy children as they tumble headlong on the floor of the car, picks them up and dusts them and their little gilt-edged hymn-books with a quite old-fashioned solicitude and care.

In the street there is a thin intermittent stream of people on their way to church or chapel, but the generality are standing at corners, where narrow crowded streets join the main thoroughfare: people who have evidently stepped from their beds into the streets without much trouble in the way of change of apparel. At the corners, too, throng eager shoe-blacks, a ragged guerilla tribe, among them an old broken man, his grey hair streaming in the wind, who is polishing the substantial ankle-boots of a sturdy young costermonger in a peaked hat and bright bandanna.

"Now for the Tabernacle," murmurs the conductor, as the car stops at a wide opening, where are drawn up a few omnibuses that make the journey from distant Bayswater. Here is a cab-stand, too, with a comfortable refuge close by, upon which hangs a large placard, "Dr. B— will preach this morning at the Edinburgh Castle." But there is no lack of announcements more or less sensational. The music-hall is placarded with invitations to come and hear some popular preacher. The theatre promises to open its doors this evening, with Moody and Sankey's hymns and a special choir. Everywhere there are signs of a considerable activity of religious life, of strong efforts to attract thereto the vast inert mass of poverty and wretchedness all about. But to all these appeals there is, as far as one can see as yet, no strong, unmistakable response. A fair sprinkling of people are hurrying to different places of worship, but all are decently dressed. No broken boots are to be seen among them, no greasy caps moulded on bullet heads, but all as respectable and even fashionable in attire as a similar gathering in Camberwell or Hammersmith.

Now, as we plunge into the narrow back streets, life seems to stop all of a sudden. A cold and hungry stillness reigns throughout. The streets are clean indeed, the bitter east wind has done better than the Board of Works, and there are no special indications of poverty in the long grim rows of little dwellings, except for their extreme bareness and almost ominous quietude. Where there are blinds, they are drawn, or perhaps an old blanket is fastened across. But the houses where there are old blankets to spare are few and far between in this quarter; in general the dust that is coated on the half transparent glass is sufficient protection from the curious outside gazer. Little smoke rises from the chimneys; it is cheaper to lie in bed and

shiver under one's rags than to get up and light a fire. Only at the butcher's shop at the corner is there something going on. A butcher innocent of legs or sirloins is this, a butcher who deals in scraps, in morsels, the snippings from the tables of bigger butchers; morsels critically handled over and over again by sallow, hollow-eyed customers—women huddled up in faded old waterproofs that do duty for a whole wardrobe; men who, what with the cold and the effects of last night's gin, threaten to shake themselves out of their loosely-secured garments. And you might walk for miles and miles through these quiet humble streets this Sunday morning, and see no brighter sight than these.

There are coffee-shops open, however, where one can take refuge from the shrivelling wind. Inside, the little shop is split up into narrow boxes, where a man of ordinary stature can only edge himself in sideways. The middle box is the snuggest, for there is the stove, but that is occupied by a knot of ill-looking lads, who would be noisier and more offensive in their behaviour but for the awe inspired by two burly costers who are reading the *Illustrated* and the *Graphic*, each in a box to himself. Coloured engravings from these two journals ornament the walls, with a German reproduction of a drawing of Cromwell and John Milton; rather a surprise in such company, but suggesting some hidden vein of Puritan sentiment somewhere below the surface.

By this time the noisy boys have absorbed as much warmth as they are fairly entitled to in consideration of a pint of tea among them, and they shuffle awkwardly away, to explode when just outside the door into shrieks of laughter mingled with stifled cries, "Joe, by — Boss Joe!" while by the clatter of their feet they seem to be performing a triumphant dance about some moving object. A lad darts in breathless; it is Joe, no doubt, and his baffled tormentors make off with a final whoop. But the boss's face expresses neither fun nor anger. Such expression as can filter through a thick coating of dirt is cautious, stealthy, but above all—hungry. He makes for the vacant place by the stove; his fingers work about the stove-pipe as if he were clawing in the warmth greedily. "Two a' tea, two slice, n' 'adock," he whispers huskily to the hostess who is looking over at him from her kitchen. The "two a' tea" is brought in a two-storeyed blue cup, a whole pint of it, and

with it the "two slice," substantial chunks of bread-and-butter. Joe hovers over it hungrily, but indulges in no surreptitious pickings; this is a banquet to be savoured, to be gloated over. "Put a bit of butter on the 'adock, missus, please," he cries, as the strong fumes from the cooking fish pervade the room. And when the haddock comes Joe does not rashly attack it, but watches the bit of butter slowly melting in epicurean ecstasy. He forgets the cold outside, his miserable garments, the ragged jersey, the tattered cords, the rags that wrap his bleeding feet. For the moment he has warmth, and home, and friends, with a deliciously browned haddock simmering under his nose.

The clock points to five minutes to eleven and it is time to be moving. It does not do for a casual visitor to be too early at the Tabernacle, for till five minutes to the hour, only seat-holders are admitted. Thus at the doors is a little crowd of people waiting to be admitted, while others more privileged file through and pass in. It is really an enormous building, oblong, with a square tower at each angle of brownish-yellow brick, not beautiful, nor pretending to be, but solid and to the purpose. A hospitable Tabernacle also, for when the time of privilege is expired, the whole area of unoccupied seats is open to all comers. And all comers flock in, not with a rush, but in a full stream, and the Tabernacle, three parts full already, becomes now almost crowded. A large hall, light and cheerful, with galleries all round light and strong in twisted ironwork, supported by light iron columns, all bright with gilding and colour. At the further end is the tribune, or pulpit, a semicircular platform projecting from the gallery, supported by its own iron columns, the space below railed off as a dais with seats as if for a choir. Clusters of gas jets twinkle everywhere, adding to the cheerfulness of the general surroundings. Altogether there is a kind of oriental lightness and grace. The seats, too, are comfortable, and the same for everybody, excepting indeed a raised seat in the gallery, behind the tribune, probably intended for the deacons or elders, veritable overseers in this manner.

At eleven o'clock to the minute there is a slight stir overhead, the deacons' bench is occupied, and the preacher has taken his seat in the middle of the tribune. At the same time the dais below has been filled by a procession of little boys. Are they choristers? Well, they are nice little

fellows, anyhow, comfortably rigged out, everyone with a neat little tweed great-coat and a warm red and black comforter. In front of the boys their conductor—the precentor, no doubt—seats himself at a table fronting the congregation. There are no ecclesiastical habits, not the Puritan band, nor even the universal white tie. The preacher, in a long great coat, looks rather like a clever surgeon, worried with too large a practice.

The Tabernacle could not have been quite full to start with, for after the first prayer a considerable multitude file in and find places without difficulty. But it is a grand congregation too, although one feels a pang of personal disappointment at finding the very poor to be virtually absent. There are no shabby waterproofs or battered bonnets; not a black eye visible on all these intelligent faces. Boss Joe would sneak out of this pretty quickly. But on the other hand, it is encouraging to know that there is such a nucleus of good honest respectable English middle-class life in the midst of all this wilderness of seething poverty. They do not live here for their own pleasure, these worthy people who throng the Tabernacle; they are all connected, no doubt, with the industries of the district. Traders, managers, foremen, overlookers, and skilled mechanics, the very bone and sinew of the land.

There is no harm, perhaps, in saying that the whole service is bright and energetic, that the preacher does not spare himself in voice and action, and that the psalmody is good. I don't think the little choir boys in their snug coats and red comforters do very much to help it—they do their best, perhaps, but they don't seem to have been chosen for their voices—but everybody sings. There is no organ, but the precentor leads with eyes and arms, and voice, evidently, too, with his whole heart. No slurring notes, no lingering cadences; the precentor picks us up and drives us on with irresistible "go." And what a grand thing is a hymn after all—even the words of Augustus Toplady—welling out from a thousand throats; how it stirs the heart with a wave of long forgotten feelings and associations! Something of the great universal voice seems to move in the thunderous notes, all humanity seems to join the pathetic appeal to the unseen.

The preacher is of the school of Spurgeon evidently. Hardy in metaphor, familiar in gesture and action, with not a scrap of notes

to aid his memory, but he never fails nor falters for an instant. Even the spacious platform seems narrow for his energetic movements. It is the old familiar drama of the tempter and the soul of man, with a background of the Assyrians laying waste the fenced cities of Israel. Something of the gloom and doubt which encompass a nation and a faith at a perilous and crucial crisis of existence, give a present interest to the theme; but gloom and doubt give way at last before the sanguine energy of the preacher—the tempter is foiled, the Assyrians are finally routed, and with the Israelites' song of triumph the sermon comes to an end.

Nobody seemed to find the sermon long, unless, indeed, the little choir boys, who yawned, made faces at each other, and fidgeted about in a quite refreshing manner. The life of boyhood had not been squeezed out of these little urchins evidently, and the precentor, so severe with the rest of us, could not have been a harsh taskmaster.

As the crowd pass out, making the desert streets alive again, a little pamphlet is put into people's hands, a record of the past ten months' work by the minister of the Tabernacle, of the work done among the poor of these wretched hungry back-streets and slums. About a thousand poor miserable homes, it seems, are connected with the Tabernacle by the tie of material help. Some of the little histories related by the missionaries of the Tabernacle have touches of quaint pathos. Here is one: "The father of this family fell out of work, and walked about so long a time, that he could not bear it any longer. He obtained a ship and went away. After he was gone, his wife was taken ill, and through her being laid up she lost her little work. . . . This evening they took the mother away to the infirmary. She left her three little ones behind, the landlady telling her they should have part of such as she had for her own children." Again: "Mother and two daughters work at match-box making, furniture consists of one chair and small table, no bed, a bundle of rags to lie on. The pay is twopence-farthing per one hundred and forty-four boxes, out of which they have to find string and paste." Or here: "A poor young widow sitting in a cold room with her two little ones without a bit of firing. She is a silk-weaver, and she is paid sevenpence-halfpenny per yard. At present she has not anything to do." And now we come upon "one of the most wonderful cases we have seen. He stands

seven feet high, giant at a theatre, now laid low with consumption, remarkably gentle." The gentle giant is dead now, his last hours not without solace. Here is a case of sudden orphanage. "The father died a short time ago, and left a widow and eight children. On going into the house to-day, the mother was lying in her coffin; she was buried this afternoon. A family of eight are thus left without father and mother. May the Lord give us grace to look after such." And this brings us to another of the institutions of the Tabernacle—its orphanage. They are not a long-lived race these toilers in the East; bad air, crowded dwellings, insufficient food, and scanty clothing, and with these the accidents of perilous callings, all contribute to cut short their scanty portion of life. Widows and orphans abound in this wilderness, and it is a happy thing there is someone to look after them besides the parish overseer. And our preacher has set to work, ready help forthcoming from all sides, and established a little home for such orphans; a comfortable home, with nice playground, and all that boys can wish for. And what seems good, is that the boys go out to school, and that thus the home flavour is not lost. And these boys seem to be rather the pets of the Tabernacle. A friend insists on their keeping up good fires, and sends them coal for nothing; another will not have them stinted in slices, and provides the daily bread on the same easy terms; others send boots, caps, umbrellas, comforters—are they red and black ones, by the way?—while a thoughtful friend, unknown, sends for each boy a comfortable tweed great-coat. These are the little boys who sit under the tribune, the urchins whom we took to be choir-boys. Well would it be if every church had such a choir as that.

And now the broad expanse of the Whitechapel Road is stretched out in the yellow light, half fog and half sunshine, the footway dark with the people from church and chapel; tram-cars are creeping softly along, and bright red omnibuses; and a touch of galvanic life seems to have shot through the grim careworn streets. Doors open and shut, ragged children dart in and out, dragged waterproofs flit hastily by, the knots of loungers at the street corners are suddenly absorbed like muddy pools when the gutters are opened. One o'clock has struck, the levee of King Gin is begun, and what a rush there is down Petticoat Lane, a perfect torrent of young fellows,

into which dart shrieking little match-boys, who are whirled down, take breath, and dart in again like so many fry in a mill-race. The great clothes market is over for the day, and Tom and Bill are dashing with the impetuosity of youth for the nearest public-house. Here are the young working men of the period, who flock to Petticoat Lane on a Sunday morning from every part of London. You hear the same legend wherever you go, of a coat bought in Petticoat Lane for eight shillings, which was put away, with the pawnbroker, next day for nine-and-six. Words cannot further go, it is of no use to paint or embellish upon that. Never did mediæval legend of miracle or marvel operate more speedily and universally. Everybody rushes to Petticoat Lane, everybody finds the handsome gentlemanly garment at eight shillings. Let us hope everybody is equally fortunate in finding the accommodating relative next day!

VISITED ON THE CHILDREN.

BY THEO. GIFT.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER XIV. JENNY'S BIRTHDAY VISITOR.

"Now, I wonder if he remembered that it was my birthday, and meant to give me one bit of pleasure at any rate on it," said Jenny to herself. "Anyhow, if he didn't, Providence did, so I can be thankful to someone without any waste of gratitude. Oh, dear! oh, dear! how nice it will be to see him again and— But I wonder if Sybil will like it."

She was sitting at the breakfast-table, an empty coffee-cup and toast-rack, and an eggshell from which the interior had been similarly despoiled, testifying at once to the frugality of the repast, and the completeness with which it had been despatched; while in her hand she held a post-card, the contents of which she was devouring with even greater zest than she had brought to her meal; but though she lifted her eyes quickly at the last thought, it was not to Sybil's face. The chair opposite to her was empty, the table was only laid for one, and it was nothing but the force of habit which had made her raise her eyes to appeal to her sister, who, for many days now, had been too much of an invalid to make her appearance at breakfast-time.

At first, indeed, after that conversation in which Sybil confessed that her engage-

ment was at an end, she had seemed to grow better instead of worse; not much better, perhaps, or very much stronger; but showing a gentle, gradual improvement, which, to Jenny's infinite joy, found an echo in a less mournful tone of voice, and an occasional brightness in the eyes, of late so dimmed and saddened.

To speak the truth, however, these last changes for the better were chiefly due to Sybil's own efforts not to let her sister see that she was mourning for the lover whom the former had been so ready to give her credit for renouncing. But I think the very fact of having spoken of him at all, of having broken down, by her own avowal, the dread which had been hanging over her of being questioned as to his whereabouts and intentions, and of having by the same confession shown her right to a little private sorrow on his account, without attracting either blame or suspicion to him, had done her good unawares. She began to occupy herself a little, which (even if the occupation was only a bit of crewel-work) was of service to her; and to go out, at first only thickly veiled and in a bath-chair, but later for a turn in the lane, leaning on Jenny's arm; and finally, as far as the common, which, broken and gorse-covered, and sported over by myriads of butterflies, white, blue, and bronze-coloured, reminded her of that at Chadleigh, where she and her sister had raced each other in the sunshine in the days when they first came to live at Hillbrow, and where later she had met Gareth Vane and owned her love for him. Alas! that last was an unfortunate reminder, bringing with it such a flood of sudden, irrepressible tears as no veil could conceal, and as frightened Jenny half out of her senses, and made her terribly repentant of having coaxed her sister so far. But Sybil would not turn back even then, or allow that anything was wrong. She sat down on a grassy knoll and leant her head against Jenny's shoulder, and, though the tears continued to flow, the sparkling sunshine which changed them into diamonds as they started, and the fresh breeze which dried them on her cheek as they fell, were not without their effect. Had not the breeze ruffled and flirted with her just so when she and Gareth stood hand-in-hand among the apple-scented furze bloom on Chadleigh Heath? Had not the sunshine laughed in her eyes just as gaily, the day he sealed their blue beatitude with passionate kisses? And if Nature could

be so much the same here as there, why should he be different? Why, might he not appear some day on this common as suddenly as he had done on that, and tell her that this misery was all a mistake and that he loved her still as he had loved her then?

To Jenny's joy and surprise Sybil proposed herself next day to take the same walk; and after that it became the rule to do so every morning, Sybil's steps turning instinctively towards the common directly they left the cottage; while she rejected with nervous timidity any suggestion to vary the sameness of the walk by a visit to the village, or even to the more frequented parts of the common itself.

Unfortunately, while out on one of these daily promenades, they happened to be caught in a heavy shower at a further distance from the cottage than they had ever been before. Neither of the girls had an umbrella with her; and Jenny, in her dread lest Sybil should get wet through and be laid up afresh, hurried her home at almost running speed. It was that exertion, indeed, far more than the wetting, which did the mischief; for the hæmorrhage which came on again almost as soon as she was in her room was more serious than the first one, and infinitely worse for her than the cold which, despite the hurrying, she managed to catch into the bargain. No one but herself knew of the former, however; after all, it was not very violent, and did not last long; and as the previous one had left no apparent ill effects behind it she thought little of its recurrence, and only kept it to herself lest the others should be frightened by it into preventing her from going any more to the common where the poor child nursed a faint, foolish hope of once more encountering her fickle lover.

She would keep quiet for a day or two, she thought, and then she would be all right again and able to resume her walks; but before the day or two were out the change in the weather, ushered in by that sudden shower, showed itself more decidedly. With the beginning of September, wind, rain, and frequent thunder-storms set in, as I have said; and though she still went out whenever a sunny afternoon or calm interval permitted the indulgence, it was evident that she had lost strength. The least puff of wind, the gentlest incline made her stop and pant, her steps grew slower and more faltering, once or twice she complained of a pain in her side, and for more than a week now she had yielded to

Jenny's persuasions and had stayed in bed until the noonday sun had warmed the cottage parlour, and made it pleasanter for her reception.

As that luminary, though dancing on the latticed panes of Mrs. Matherson's chamber above, had not yet touched the purple clematis which straggled over the parlour window, Jenny knew that Sybil would not be thinking of getting up for another hour; and therefore pushed back her chair and went off to find her, post-card in hand.

"Guess who is coming here to-day!" she said, entering the inner room with an almost dancing step, and holding the missive high over her head.

Sybil very nearly sprang out of bed. The one thought in her mind at the moment—alas! the one thought always there—was Gareth. It was he who was coming. He had written to say so. At last she should know what had come between them. It all passed through her mind in a second, while yet the sudden leaping at her heart choked her voice too much to ask a question, and before Jenny, alarmed at the white excitement of her sister's face, could hurry out an explanatory word.

"It is Lion. He has written about it. Dear Sybil, did I startle you? Were you asleep? I am so sorry."

Sybil had sunk back upon her pillow. The whiteness of the shock had gone off in a crimson blush, flooding face and throat and even filling her eyes with tears. How foolish, how weak she had been! As if Jenny would have looked like that if it had been he. And—suppose she had betrayed herself.

"You did startle me," she said, with the touch of plaintive pettishness which was her nearest approach to temper: "and I don't understand now. Lion Ashleigh coming here! What for?"

"Only to inquire for us," said Jenny, much subdued in her glee by the tone of the question. "See, he says: 'I shall be walking over your way to-morrow afternoon, and will call at the cottage to inquire for you. Don't see me unless you like. I can't come in, anyhow, but I want to know how you both are, and if there is anything I can do for you.—L. A.' Isn't that like him, Sybil? I believe it is because I mentioned in my last letter that you were not so well. But would you rather he did not come? I hoped you wouldn't mind, now."

"I should mind seeing him very much," said Sybil, trying to recover herself, though she still spoke very falteringly; "but of

course it is very kind of him, wonderfully so. Dear Jenny," catching sight of her sister's downcast expression, "don't think me churlish. I am very glad you should see him, and on your birthday, too; it will cheer you up."

"Yes, I was glad he should be coming on my birthday," said Jenny, rather disconsolately, "for it did seem— Well, birthdays used to be such happy days at home, and I couldn't help thinking of the last one while I was dressing this morning, and feeling a little down. But if it pains you, Sybil? I thought—that is, I had hoped you might see him."

Sybil shook her head.

"No, dear," she said gently, "I could not do that, nor would he wish it. I have injured him too much, and he has not forgotten enough. Don't you see that he says he will not come in? He knows as well as I do that any meeting between us could only be pain to both. But, all the same, that must not keep him away, especially after his taking such a long 'cross-country walk to see us. You must make him come in, Jenny. Tell him that I am not leaving my room till the evening. It will be true for to-day; and I can tell you one thing, it will be the pleasantest day I shall have spent since we came here, if I know that you are having some pleasantness too. Do you think I don't guess how you miss all the old home faces, although you never say anything about it? I am glad that he should come here."

But though this assurance, and the pale little smile which came out to give it force, comforted Jenny, and helped her to persuade herself that it was only because Sybil was conscious of the revival of her old feelings for Lionel that she shrank remorsefully from seeing him, the curate was not to be so easily moved. Jenny had been on the watch for him for an hour before he came, had dusted the parlour, arranged and re-arranged the furniture to look as like a Hillbrow room as possible, put fresh water to the flowers, and spread out Sybil's just completed antimacassar over the shabby old sofa-back; but when all was done it was wasted trouble. Lion was quite firm about not coming in, and it was only the blank look in poor Jenny's face, when he persisted in his refusal, which moved him to suggest that she should come for a walk with him instead.

"You're horribly pale, Jenny, and the air will do you good. I don't believe you

take half exercise enough. Come back a bit of the way with me, we have lots to say to one another."

"Tons," said Jenny emphatically, and flew off to obtain permission from her sister, whom she persisted in treating as head of the family at present; though in every matter, except that of any enjoyment for herself, it was she who ruled and arranged everything, and watched over Sybil with all the solicitude and authority of a young mother.

She was back in five minutes at present, hatted and jacketed; and with eyes shining so joyously under the black dreariness of her crape veil that Lion felt his heart touched to an uncomfortable extent. He had been feeling enough for her before; but how sad her life must have grown if the mere idea of a walk with him could give her so much pleasure!

He began, nevertheless, to scold her at once. What did she mean by cutting her old friends? Why had she never answered Adelaide's letter? Adelaide was ill in London, and her mother was with her; but she had told him that she had written to Jenny Dysart and had had no reply. And why, above all, had she snubbed his mother and prevented her from coming to see them?

"They're both awfully hurt about it, I can tell you, Jenny; the mother especially. She feels things more than people think, little as she says. Yesterday there were tears in her eyes when she was talking about you. Why are you so unkind to her?"

"I did not mean to be unkind," said poor Jenny, greatly quenched in her cheerfulness, but a little proud withal. "Ada was very good-natured, and so was your mother. They meant to be so, at least; but there was a reason— Please, Lion, don't say anything more. I can't tell you about it. It is best as it is."

"Best that you should live as you are doing now, shut away from all your friends and everyone that loves you!" said Lion. "Nonsense Jenny! you'll make me angry if you talk in that way; and even if you could stand it (you were always a bit of a hermit-crab), Sybil couldn't. You know how she hates being alone; I have heard her say so a million times."

"But it was different then," said Jenny, blushing deeply. "Sybil is in trouble now; and besides, she is not well enough; she wouldn't care—"

"For the sympathy of friends in her

trouble, and the attention of friends in her illness! Jenny, that's all wrong, and I don't believe it. There never was anyone who liked sympathy and attention more than Sybil; and if she is ill she needs them in a still greater degree, and to be taken care of and comforted and—"

"I know it and I try—I do try to take care of her and comfort her. I do all I can. Lion, why are you so hard on me? You don't understand," cried poor Jenny in great trouble. Lion turned on her quickly:

"I know you do; and I understand everything, you dear, brave, independent little girl," he said, taking her hand in his big clasp and smiling reassuringly. "My mother offended you. I am not defending her—you had good cause for offence, and I told her so; and Ada wrote your sister a silly, angry letter full of girlish rhodomontade for which she ought to have been whipped; but, Jenny child, the best people do silly things sometimes; you and I too for that matter; and if we are not to forgive one another, if we are to go on bearing malice—"

"But it isn't malice," said Jenny piteously, her face still burning, and her big eyes brimming over with the loveliest look of shamed appeal. "Ada was quite right in her letter. I should have said just the same, and been just as angry at the time; but now—now, when mother is dead and poor Sybil so ill and sad, not even to ask after her or mention her name. Lion, it's no use their writing in this way. I had rather they did not write to me at all; and I won't be separated from my sister. She never did anything wrong, except to you. You know she did not, and they ought to know it too. Oh! if even you have heard what they say, how can you wonder at me?"

"Dear Jenny, don't cry," said Lion soothingly. "Don't, pray don't, or I shall be sorry I said anything to you. I shall be afraid to say anything more; and I want to do so. It is necessary that I should, for Sybil's sake and your own. There, there, you needn't jerk your head—I know you don't care for yourself; but Sybil cares for you. She could not like to see you injured any more than you would see her so, and if you are not to be separated for harm, then you must not be for good. My dear, harm is being done to you both by your present line of conduct; and if I speak of it, it is not—God knows—for pleasure or intrusiveness, or even because

I was your sister's lover once—put that out of your head, please, altogether—but just as a parson with a parson's right to look after a couple of orphan girls, and still more as the friend your mother trusted to stand in the place of a brother to you. She wasn't afraid to do so. Need you be more prudish, Jenny?"

"I am not—prudish," said Jenny, but the words came with difficulty, and it was well the way these two were taking led them along a quiet country lane, shut in by high hedges, for anyone seeing them might have thought it was a lovers' quarrel to judge from the raised tones of Lion's voice and the tears which, despite all Jenny's efforts to restrain them, would trickle down her cheeks, and make wet stains on her black bonnet strings. The curate felt dreadfully remorseful and compassionate; but, before coming out, he had made up his mind to do his duty, and was not going to give in.

"I know you are not," he said cheerfully. "You're a brave, true-hearted girl; but you aren't Solomon and the Book of Wisdom rolled together, so you mustn't try to be brave in the wrong direction, or take offence where none is meant."

"I couldn't take offence with you, Lion."

"That's right, then let us speak frankly like man to man, or true man to true woman, which is better. These shameful slanders about your sister, which I'm ashamed to think should ever have reached your ears, you and I, and, I hope, plenty of others, know to be nothing but foul, impudent lies. That's not enough, however. Everyone who has heard them, and they've been spread about pretty widely, must know the same. It is right that they should. A man can afford to meet attacks on his reputation with contemptuous silence. A woman can't. You know the old saying about 'Cæsar's wife,' and it's a true one. To talk about a girl at all does her harm, no matter whether the talk be true or false; and the very fact of her not being able to defend herself obliges others to be more careful for her protection. Now you must tell your sister——"

"Tell Sybil?" cried Jenny. The tears had left her paler than usual; but she flushed up brightly enough now, and her eyes sparkled. "Do you suppose Sybil has ever heard a word of this? Why, it would have killed her. Thank you, Lion. I can take better care of her than that."

"What! she doesn't even know of it?"

You have kept it all to yourself? Jenny, you are a brave girl. So much the better, however, for I hope we can manage to keep it from her still. The only wonder to me is that—there's a person whom it's not pleasant to me to speak of, child, but I must do it—that Mr. Gareth Vane has not heard of these infamous rumours, and put a stop to them. Perhaps, however, he has not been down to Chadleigh End since you left it."

The blush deepened on Jenny's face.

"I don't know. He does not—Lion, you must not think he comes here. Sybil has never seen him since mamma died, nor I either. She—I don't know that I ought to tell you, but I can't help it—she is not engaged to him any longer."

There was a silence. Jenny had brought out her announcement with so much hesitation and embarrassment, and with such a fluttering of that secret hope of hers at her heart, that she dared not look at her companion, lest he should read it in her face, while he, on his side, turned as red as if someone had slapped him there, and looked straight in front of him at nowhere. When he did speak, it was with a rather too palpable effort at the coolness of an uninterested friend.

"She is not? Well, that is nothing to anyone but herself, unless—did you tell her what I wrote you, that her mother had virtually given her consent before I left her that evening?"

"Yes, but I think—of course I don't know, and I can't talk about it even to Sybil—but I think that, knowing he was really the cause of poor mamma's death—Oh, Lion, would it be natural for her to care for him in the same way afterwards, such a man, too, as he was, anyhow."

"He was the man she loved," said Lion bitterly; then with a shake of his head as if to dismiss the subject: "but that doesn't matter now; and the only difference what you have told me makes is that it leaves others free to bestir themselves for her protection without infringing on his rights. He will have to do his part in any case. The thing now is to do ours. Jenny, was your sister out at all that evening?"

"Yes, Lion, she was. Even the servants knew that. One could not help their doing so."

"And Mr. Vane——?"

"She never saw him at all. He wrote and asked her to do so. I won't say anything against him. They were engaged, and he had not seen her since mamma for-

bade him the house, but he wanted to see her about something of importance; so he said he would come down by the eight o'clock train that Friday, and asked her to meet him by the station. I don't think (in novels the good heroes and heroines do lots of worse things) that there was much harm in her doing so."

"I don't think there was."

"And when the train arrived he was not in it. She could not see him at any rate. She waited where he bade her for a little while. It was near the old gravel-pit, and in gathering some flowers she leant over the edge of it, and fell in. Fortunately, old Jowl, the herb-seller, passed by that way after a time, and helped her out; but it was dark by then, and raining hard, so he wouldn't take her home till morning, and she had hurt her foot in falling too much to walk by herself."

"Then she positively never even saw Mr. Vane?"

"Never since the day he left Dyson's farm. Oh, Lion, hasn't it been sad altogether for her?"

"Sadder even than you think. Poor girl, poor Sybil! Jenny, has she any idea what time it was when the accident occurred?"

"Just before the up train came in, for she heard the whistle."

"Half-past eight! And how long was it before this Jowl found her?"

"She said it seemed a lifetime; but it was only just ten when they got to his cottage; and he kept her there till five o'clock next morning. There, Lion, I have told you all about it, though I would not tell your mother; but you care for Sybil, you believe in her; so I don't mind, only take care that you never repeat a word of it or she might be vexed with me. You know how vulgar people would laugh and make game of the idea of one of the Miss Dysarts going out to meet a—a lover—and his never coming. Poor Sybil! it makes her ill even now to think of that night; and we paid old Jowl to hold his tongue about it."

"Then you did the most foolish thing two foolish girls could have done. What, pay a man to hide an innocent truth, and then run away yourselves, and leave scandal-mongers to invent a harmful lie in place of it! Look here, Jenny, so far from

holding my tongue I am going to tell what you have told me far and near."

"Lion, you won't! Think of Sybil's feelings!"

"I do think of them and of what they would be if she knew—Why, child, what nonsense you are talking! You don't know half of what has been said; and there is no need you should; only you must leave me quite free and just believe that I am doing what your own father would have done; or your brother, if you had had one."

"Dear Lion, you are better than twenty brothers. Indeed, I trust you, only—"

"Only you don't! That doesn't matter in the least; for I give you a fair warning, I am going to write to Mr. Vane and let him know that he had better come forward and say where he was on that evening; and to see old Jowl, who has played you as false as the ancient villain dared; and then—then I think I shall go to Mrs. de Boonyen (I find she is the principal scandal-monger in this instance), and request that she will take the trouble to retract all she has been saying with the least possible delay. And now, Jenny, here's the end of the lane; so good-bye, I won't take you any further; and mind, Sybil is not to hear a word of any of this. Promise!"

"Not till she has earned the right to hear it by loving you for your own sake again," said Jenny to herself as she retraced her homeward way alone. "And I think—I think she must have begun to do so already. How could she help it? Oh, dear! I wonder what fatherless girls do who haven't Lion Ashleighs to help them!"

The sun was setting in a lake of saffron flame. Long feathery clouds, orange-coloured and fringed with rose, floated high in a windy, pale blue sky. Already the evenings were getting chilly, and the alders in the hedge were turning to purple, the willows by the grey, quivering pool in the hollow to faint yellow. Autumn was setting in, but for the moment the sunset glow, which hung over everything, irradiated the whole face of Nature and was reflected in Jenny's heart.

Despite all that had happened, aye, even with the tear-stains undried upon her cheek, she could not say she had had an unhappy birthday.

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